

POST-URBAN LANDSCAPE

# DETROIT IS EVERYWHERE



The splendid Michigan Railroad Station, Warren and Wetmore Architects, 1913. The main entrance leads to a vaulted waiting room filled with light streaming through enormous windows. If you are down-and out or mentally ill, this is a place to tickets to nowhere, to draw angles or write graffiti, to pace, to stay out of the rain and wind. More than any other derelict space I've seen, this fine Neo-Classical structure says, "We were once a great city." Detroit, 1994. **Camilo Jose Vergara.**

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## Post-Urban Landscape

May 20-July 1, 1995

Gallery Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 11-6pm

Opening Reception: Saturday, May 20, 6-8pm

Once hailed as the model of urban productivity, now maligned as an example of inner-city decay, Detroit's past present and future serve as an empirical model for every city in transition. If Detroit can go from boomtown to ghost town in 40 years, from dynamic downtown to burnt core, are all cities doomed a similar faith?

Detroit is Everywhere is a collaborative inquiry by photo-journalist Camilo Jose Vergara, Columbia University's Urban Design Studio and Richard Plunz, Cranbrook Academy of Art's Architecture Studio and Dan Hoffman, and StoreFront for Art & Architecture and Kyong Park. The exhibition contains urban studies and proposals for the city of Detroit.

### A Symposium on Detroit

May 24

Call 431-5795 for Details

### Arkisex

May 13, 11am-7pm

Lucio Pozzi and actors

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# STOREFRONT

Art + Architecture

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Project description

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Living in Detroit, one cannot help but notice the extreme differences in economy between the center city and its surrounding suburbs. Everywhere one looks there are signs of growth and decay; from the ring of development at the outer edge of the suburbs to the shrinking economy of the inner city. To be sure, Detroit is not the only city in America that is faced with this situation. Many other cities have had to deal with the coexistence-existence of a broad range of economies within their boundaries. But what sets Detroit apart is the consistency with which the model is applied. There are no exceptions. The distance between old and new, poor and wealthy, growth and decay are part and parcel of the city. Locating oneself on the economic map is simple; the further away one is from the center, the higher the economy. Development always moves to the periphery, leaving in its wake the visible entropy of diminished economies.

As architects and designers living in the undertow we have had to adjust ourselves to an urban landscape where buildings appear and disappear from view as quickly as the styles of automobiles. Change is now background of the urban scene, transforming architecture from its primary role as an enduring, spatial reference to that of a temporary infrastructure against which the images of a commercial culture are displayed. In order to survive, architecture must be light, mutable and commercial. If there is any excess to the economy of building it is now devoted to the projection of a commercial image. In Detroit we have found the every surface bears the sign of economy. Public space is now commercial space.

The work shown here is an attempt to find an intersection between the commercial necessity of imagery and the slower, tectonic nature of architecture. This is a thin space within which to work, one characterized by the rule of maximum effects produced by minimum means; big images on thin surfaces. Our studies seek to find a way to re-establish a logic of construction in the image; something as simple as painting on a block wall or considering a new way of assembling a plywood sign. Our intention is to make architecture something more than a commercial infrastructure while accepting the limited means to be found within contemporary building practice.

All of the projects shown here are drawn from existing sites and programs along Eight Mile road, the administrative boundary between the city and its surrounding suburbs. This is an appropriate location to test our designs, one that is equally charged with the high and low ends of the economic equation. Creativity is not limited by economy. We find inspiration in all parts of the city.

The programs for the work are drawn from those of a typical commercial strip; billboards, motels, office buildings, car dealerships and party stores. In each case we have added some program, structure and color in order to enhance the experience of commercial space. In so doing we have worked to re-establish architecture in the public realm, reintroducing its timeless concerns in a commercial context.

Chris Bakkila  
John Chan  
Dan Hoffman  
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Kelly McCormick



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Chris Bakkila  
John Chan  
Dan Hoffman  
Mark Lee  
Kelly McCormick  
Matt Owens  
Douglas Pancoast  
Karl Puljak

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## Party Store

The high rate of abandonment and the erosion of the economic base has made it difficult to support a concentration of local retail businesses in the center city of Detroit. The one exception to this is the ubiquitous Party Store that sells a wide variety of food and household items. These are generally located on street corners in buildings that were not specifically planned for this use. The owners of the Party Stores rarely can afford to pay for manufactured signs or special architectural treatments on their buildings. However, it is important that their stores can be seen from a distance in the neighborhoods since they are few and far between. The simple but inexpensive solution to this problem has been to pay itinerant artists to paint over the entire building with bright colors, advertising the various items sold within. The result is a remarkable, vernacular form that changes with the latest coat of paint. The juxtaposition of the existing building forms and the painted, graphic images produce unexpected crossover of effect whereby the architecture is flattened and the sign assumes added volume. We have also found that the interface between the material surface and the painted images to be of particular interest, providing a clear example of how advertising can be inflected by local circumstances.



## Car Dealership Billboard

One of the social events of the working week in Detroit is to go car shopping on Thursday nights. Despite the fact that one rarely buys a car, it is fun to be amidst the lights and the colors and to dream of something new. The lots in the Detroit area are very large, taking up vast amounts of open space along the feeder road to the highways. It was thought that the space could be articulated more effectively if it were divided up into large, outdoor rooms which could provide a more intimate environment for the selling of the cars. The walls of the rooms could be ornamented with various images reflecting the subliminal qualities of the particular style or model. In this case the image was constructed from an actual advertisement which was blanked out to the point that it was just-unrecognizable. In this way the image is mediated so that it can intersect with the surface qualities of the wall itself. The point here was to find a medium between an image and the material presence of architecture. The presence of the large walls or rooms on the site would also re-establish a volumetric density to the street edge, providing more surfaces for light and color and filling in the pedestrian emptiness produced by the speed of the automobile.



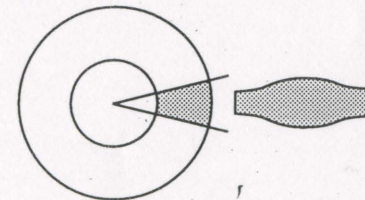
## Office Building Billboard

The site chosen for this project is located at the intersection between the Southfield Freeway and Eight Mile Road amidst a grouping of office buildings built in the late sixties. Many of these buildings are now only partially occupied and it is unlikely that they will receive any new tenants. (The early suburbs of Detroit are now beginning to experience the same economic dislocation seen in the inner city.) The proposition is to expose the steel frame on portions of the buildings in order to make space available for a three dimensional, translucent sign; reducing the amount of unused space and providing additional rental income for the owner. The images within the grid are designed to be seen from the broad sweep of the passing highway, their multilayered screens creating an anamorphic display that permits a greater variety of subjects and interpretations. The translucent screens will also project shadows of the image onto the surrounding parking lots.



## Construction Fence

The economy of consumption moves quickly over the commercial space of the city with new stores opening and closing at ever increasing rates. This transformation is often accompanied by the construction of a plywood fence around the particular building, taking it out of view during the changeover period. (Sometimes the entire building is replaced.) It is thought that this construction could offer the opportunity for another intersection; between the images and tonalities associated with the coming store and the simple tectonic of plywood construction. In this case the construction fence surrounds an existing structure that is to be transformed into a donut shop. The particular, curved shape of the panel is derived from unwrapping a section of a donuts surface as indicated in the diagram below. This section is repeated end to end in a continuous strip, woven through the upright supports in a circle around the existing structure. Careful attention is given to the manner in which the donut texture is painted onto the wall. In this case the texture has been digitized and applied to the surface using a silk screening process.





## Inhabited Billboards

Driving north along Woodward Avenue in Detroit, you know that you are crossing into the suburbs when you pass the two immense billboards flanking the road at the intersection of Eight Mile Road. These are two of the tallest billboards in the Detroit area. You would think that one would be enough but symmetry has its attractions in places of importance. The other notable aspect of the billboards is that they both face towards the city, turning their steel-framed backs towards the suburbs. It is remarkable how forgettable these rear surfaces are; for though we have passed them many times it is difficult to remember what they look like. Jameson has noted that advertising succeeds to the extent that it denies the context within which it is placed. The intensity of the advertising image renders its context invisible, dissolving the peripheral structure of the surrounding context into a forgettable blur. This project attempts to re-establish a volumetric clarity for structures along the commercial strip, dispersing advertising images into fragments upon the surface of simple geometric forms. In this case the wall of the volume are constructed with open faced concrete block whose exposed cores are painted various colors. The advertising takes the form of translucent windows cut into the blocks which can be back lit during the evening hours. Again, the attempt is to reestablish a surface upon which the material aspect of architecture can intersect with the demands of the commercial image.



Camilo Jose Vergara

April 24, 1995

**NEO-DETROIT:****PRIDE IN RUINS****DISCOVERING FOLK ART****CELEBRITIES WANTED AS WITNESSES**

In their prime, our imperial cities were dynamos of energy, hotbeds of innovation, octopi of capital accumulation. For the young, the white and the upwardly mobile, downtown offered a modern version of paradise. A deeply rooted belief in progress gave reassurance that things were going to get even better: hundreds of feet above the ground, highways and bridges would crisscross these cities, and planes, dirigibles and spaceships would connect them to distant continents, even to other planets.

The skyways were never built, dirigibles are a thing of the past, and the space program built its headquarters and facilities in the sunbelt. Nowadays, a belief in progress lingers on, but its locus is not urban. After WWII America began to turn against its cities, which gradually came to be perceived as shattered, menacing and obsolete.

Take Detroit. The works of man both imprint the land and rise high into the skies--signs of a city built to last. There are five freeways providing transportation about its one hundred and forty square mile area, and the People Mover, a monorail, circles the downtown. The calm natural world of the Detroit River marks the southern border of the city. Across the river is Canada.

In the late 'twenties, Detroit was deemed "The World's Largest Factory Town" one of the "The Metropolises of Tomorrow." But in the last four decades Detroit lost half its population and now the skyscrapers stand largely empty, most of its enormous car plants remain derelict, and its wide, seemingly endless commercial streets offer only meager commodities. With thirty percent of its remaining population under the age of eighteen, Detroit is a young city with little to offer its youth. How



can one mitigate the pain of seeing the city's institutions go from bad to worse, of being forced to shop outside the city limits, of being a victim of crime, of witnessing destruction all around?

Within the new world order, efforts intended to restore the city to its original position of prominence have largely failed. Only projects aiming at containment have shown modest success: the rehabilitation of deteriorating dwellings, and the construction of small developments next to hospitals, universities and corporate enclaves.

Present day Detroit is haunted by the spectacular remains of the 'twenties, 'forties and 'fifties, decades when it was a world technological leader with a population of nearly two million people. The sight of people and street dogs traversing vacant land along the main commercial streets recall views of shepherds and flocks moving among ruins in eighteenth-century Rome. In the nation that it helped so much to define, Detroit now exists as a pariah city. To reconnect it with an American way of life in which schools work, streets are safe and people have jobs, seems almost impossible.

Detroit's situation invites radical approaches. Beyond hospital centers and a large university, why not the city as an agrarian arts and craft society and tourist attraction? I propose an approach that draws on the creations of indigenous folk artists, the power of celebrities to reach a wide audience, and the allure of ruins.

Here's how. **Arts and Crafts.** Folk artists thrive in Detroit. There are scores of elegant painters of the city's ubiquitous party stores, as well as street artists who spray their graffiti and paint murals on city walls. Operating businesses, not to be confused with their failed neighbors, announce their existence and hawk their products on facades decorated like giant canvases. On windowless storefronts, sign painters create bold fields of mauve, bright reds, greens, gold and other colors, directed to drivers in fast moving cars. The lively colors of the stores create contrasting rhythms with the adjacent abandoned buildings and empty lots.



*Illustration?  
from Camilo?*

Nothing seems trivial here. Anonymous people speak in urgent words and images, the product of isolation and despair. It is difficult to feel alone in Detroit, a city of prophets and of poets who write about hope, dust, and the end of the world. In dark alleys, by bus stops and in abandoned buildings one encounters the term "Messiah" and the date of his visits. Scribblings inform us that "No one can stop atom bombin'," and that the structures of the city are "DUST!"

To gather the most vital folk artists in the nation, we need to contact such people as the homeless man who did the transportation mural for Willy's Garage on Michigan Avenue; the now-imprisoned painter who did the face of Christ on a storefront church on Park Avenue; the master of the Fenkell pool hall; the graffiti artist who painted Adam and Eve on the entrances of the former Northeastern High School; the illustrator of the herd of elephants on Grand River, and Eugene of West Warren, the tagger of Psalm 23.

**Celebrities.** In the present political climate of federal retrenchment, it is unrealistic to wait for Washington to come to the city's rescue. As a desperate gesture, why not find today's equivalents of Saint George, Joan of Ark, Lancelot or Don Quixote as advocates for Detroit to present the city's case directly to the American people?

I propose to invite celebrities--those whose every move is judged worthy of media attention--to reside in the city. I envision a program similar to the Peace Corps yet limited only to famous people. These guests would be conduits through which the conditions in the city would be constantly presented to a nation that chooses to ignore them. What if the most highly prized citizens of this country were to live daily in conditions similar to those faced by Detroit residents? Would average Americans emulate the stars and return to the city?

The invited guests would include, among others, members of the Kennedy family, former President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Barbara Streissand, Tom Hanks, Joan Rivers, Brad Pitt. A special effort would be made to lure Diana Ross and Stevie Wonder back to their former hometown. Guests would not be asked to do work in the city, only to live



there. Ideally, these honored people would be sending their children to the local public schools, shopping in neighborhood stores, using the city hospitals and depending on the Detroit police for protection. Maybe no shinning star will come. Perhaps we will get second-hand celebrities. Maybe only those who are has-beens, old, sick, or alcoholic will come.

**Ruins.** By the river, gravity is bringing down the tall bohemoths. Detroit's pre-Depression skyscrapers will never be busy with airships docking at rooftop masts, and businessmen will never move about them like modern angels shaping the world of the future. On a bronze door of the McGregor Public Library, below facing vertical angels, one personification holds an airplane, another a car with wings. Detroit's chief product never went airborne, but has indeed taken flight, leaving the city floundering in post-industrial America.

I believe that downtown Detroit is ready for revival, yet for it to happen the city needs to cherish its ruins, just as it once took pride in its soaring cathedrals of commerce. Five years ago, while walking at dusk with my seven year old daughter, I had a chance to feel the effect on her of the dark vacant skyscrapers. After a heavy summer rain, a huge red sun was setting to the north. She walked silently, her eyes wide open, her attention fully engaged. The sky above us was full of millions of bats. Nothing had prepared her for the power of this place. Today, five years later, she still talks about returning to downtown Detroit.

The city where cars had wings was once so self confident that it borrowed forms from the entire western world: castles, gothic cathedrals, romanesque churches, chandeliers and coffered ceilings. The white roof of the crumbling, contaminated Metropolitan Building has a Moorish look. Ironically, the lobby of the vacant David Broderick building, itself a 35-story ruin, retains an elegant decorative frieze depicting a classical landscape with Roman remains.

The derelict skyscrapers offer a unique setting to guide future development. No other city in the world can provide a part man-made, part natural environment, an urban monument valley, such as has begun to



evolve in Detroit. Detroit needs to call for proposals from architects, lighting designers and preservationists to define, stabilize and illuminate a skyscraper park, a magical core of a ring of theatres, stadiums, newspaper publishing companies, television stations, casinos, convention centers and shops.

I envision a 21st-century downtown dominated by ruins, but surrounded by an opera house (soon to be completed), two large theatres, a convention center, a media center and Greektown, an ethnic enclave. In this downtown, conventioners, baseball fans, gamblers, and opera and theater-goers could perambulate around the largest concentration of ruins in the world. In fair weather people could also admire the view from open air cafes, bakeries, galleries and gardens. In my mind I already hear water flowing in many fountains and reflecting pools. On the water's surface I can see the reflections of the shadowy buildings broken by waves.

The plan's chances of success would increase if future developments such as the planned casino, a new baseball stadium and a folk art gallery featuring the work of local artists are sited near the most impressive of the ruins. Now, when a growing number of scattered places are already attracting a large number of visitors and office workers, a park of ruined skyscrapers would function as connecting tissue between them. Downtown would again offer a multiplicity of activities, a secure and enchanting place to spend an entire day, not as now, to drive into for one purpose, and to rush out as soon as one's goal is accomplished.

A strategy for bringing development to a poor city based on redesigning its center for the pleasure of affluent suburbanites and tourists may seem callous and irrelevant given the pressing needs of the residents. This approach, however, may be the most effective and least expensive way to bring investors to the city, to create entrance level jobs, to increase the city's tax revenue and to preserve an essential part of Detroit's extraordinary character.

My plan would challenge people not just to accept the ruins but to be proud of them. With a man-made wilderness as its core, downtown Detroit



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is ripe for development. The city would have to select the most awesome clusters of buildings to age naturally; build the new downtown surrounding the ruins of the old; and commission folk artists to liven it up. To the rest of the city I would bring celebrities as witnesses and constantly bombard the world with the realities of Detroit. With a government that has chosen to turn its back on cities, I can't think of a better approach.

### CELEBRITIES WANTED AS WITNESSES

In their prime, our imperial cities were dynamos of energy, hearths of innovation, octopi of capital accumulation. For the young, the white and the upwardly mobile, downtown offered a modern version of paradise. A deeply rooted belief in progress gave reassurance that things were going to get even better: hundreds of feet above the ground, highways and bridges would crisscross these cities, and planes, dirigibles and spaceships would connect them to distant continents, even to other planets.

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